

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE SUPERINTENDENTS LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE



THE SUPERINTENDENTS LEADERSHIP ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM

The Superintendents Leadership Roundtable (SLR) is a service-wide leadership development program managed by the NPS Conservation Study Institute in cooperation with Regional Directors and an advisory group of participating superintendents, and more recently with the Learning and Development Office. In 2009, at the time of the evaluation, the program served approximately 100 superintendents – reaching all seven regions and about 25% of the agency’s nearly 400 field leaders. Each of the eight cohort groups of 14 park superintendents meets annually and includes a mix of geography and level of experience.

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

Dr. Jennifer Jewiss from the University of Vermont worked with Institute staff, the advisory group, SLR facilitators, and others to plan the evaluation and review the findings. The purpose of this study was to gather participants’ perspectives on SLR’s effectiveness and how key program characteristics support leadership development, document the program design and management strategies, and identify opportunities for improving SLR. Fifty randomly selected participants were interviewed – approximately 50% of those participating in the program at the time – plus the program managers and facilitators. The confidential telephone interviews averaged 60-90 minutes in length. The findings were generated from a systematic analysis of the themes identified in the interview transcripts.

FINDINGS

Overall, program participants reported that SLR is a highly effective leadership development opportunity, as indicated in the extremely positive findings outlined below. All of the program participants who were interviewed found value in the SLR program, and many indicated that it was one of the most valuable leadership development opportunities they had experienced.

How do participants describe the key characteristics of the SLR program?

Skilled facilitation supports peer-to-peer learning

- Skilled facilitators manage the dialogue and bring extensive knowledge of the field of leadership that is used to deepen the group’s analysis of case studies
- Leaders with diverse backgrounds and levels of experience come together to learn from each other and to share their varied perspectives on current leadership issues
- Peer networks are developed in the roundtable groups that can be tapped for guidance and consultation as needed over time

Valuable leadership content is shared and applied to current leadership challenges

- Leadership is the focus rather than technical and operational aspects of management
- Current leadership needs and interests are addressed – participants set the meeting agenda by developing consensus on priority discussion topics
- Pressing issues are explored in depth, often by examining case studies from participants’ parks
- Leadership resources are introduced and used to offer broader perspectives on leadership from private and other public sector arenas

An effective learning environment is created

- High levels of engagement result from participants choosing to take part in the program and their continued commitment to learning as a group over time
- Leaders are able to reflect and recharge away from the day-to-day intensity of the job
- A safe learning environment allows superintendents to openly address their own concerns and limitations in a confidential setting
- Collaborative and constructively critical approaches to problem-solving enable leaders to analyze issues and devise strategies with the guidance of peers and a skilled facilitator
- Application of new knowledge and implementation of strategies are advanced, given that participants “report back” to peers on a regular basis regarding progress made on previously discussed issues
- Trust among participants increases over time, which supports deeper learning as the group convenes for successive meetings over multiple years

What leadership capacities do participants gain from the SLR program?

The knowledge and skills gained from SLR varied – as expected given the mix of participants’ backgrounds and length of time in the program, along with variations in the content addressed by a given roundtable group. A broad cross-section of superintendents reported that their leadership capacities have been enhanced in several of the following ways as a result of participating in SLR:

- a) Increased knowledge of leadership concepts and models that inform practice
- b) Greater awareness of one’s leadership strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement
- c) Enhanced ability to coach individual staff members and the park’s management team
- d) Improved communication skills, particularly for dealing with complex and/or difficult situations
- e) Enhanced ability to develop effective relationships with surrounding communities and partner organizations
- f) Increased confidence and ability to lead at higher levels and transition into new responsibilities
- g) Greater knowledge and understanding of the Service as a whole

What limitations and challenges did participants identify?

Participation

- Interest exceeds available slots for participation
- This approach to leadership development is not suited to all learning styles
- Funding and travel logistics

Program design

- Limited full-group communication among participants of SLR groups between annual sessions

Clarity about the SLR program and support Service-wide

- Lack of clarity about the SLR program on a Service-wide level
- Uneven support for participation in the program across regions and supervisory channels

CONCLUSION

Interviewees voiced strong support for the SLR program. A superintendent from a large park, who has participated in SLR for several years, articulated a perspective shared by many:

It’s the single best opportunity for really honing in on key leadership, management, and supervisory issues that we all deal with as superintendents. It’s the best forum I’ve seen for using case studies from our individual parks to actually work through those issues and come up with a strategy for resolving problems and issues.

An overarching recommendation was to maintain the program largely as it is currently designed, facilitated, and managed. Many hoped that the necessary resources would become available to increase the number of roundtables, so that all interested candidates could participate. Overall, interviewees see SLR as an essential resource that allows them to better address many challenging leadership issues they encounter and to steadily build their knowledge and skills as leaders over time.

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